

Muslim and

Story by Beth Reece Photos by Paul Disney

IDENTITY does not elude CPT Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad. Born and raised by Baptist parents in Buffalo, N.Y., he loves a good movie, the Seattle SuperSonics, his wife and freedom.

Muhammad is an American citizen and soldier. But lately he's been the subject of nosy stares and apologetic glances. Sometimes people peer at him with suppressed anger. But Muhammad — one of seven million American Muslims and the U.S. military's first Muslim chaplain — understands the source of the anger and curiosity.

"People are concerned. They wonder what it is about the Islamic faith that they do not know, what about it has caused terrorists to strike out against America," he said from behind his desk in the Department of Ministry and Pastoral Care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

The chaplain fears humanity's capacity for hatred. He is appalled by reports that Taliban militiamen in Afghanistan have raped women and trafficked in opium, heroin and weapons.

"Major, major sins," the chaplain said. "These things are far removed from Islam. A true Muslim's conscience would not allow such acts, nor could a Muslim think he would go to paradise for taking the lives of innocent people."

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam acknowledges one God as the divine ruler of heaven and earth. It also exalts kindness and tolerance, Muhammad said.

"But human beings have the capacity to be oppressors and to use



CPT Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad — the U.S. military's first Muslim chaplain — is currently assigned to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

religion or politics to gain and exert power," he said. He emphasized that many Muslims have rejected the Taliban's acts in the same way that many Catholics have rejected the aims and actions of the Irish Republican Army.

Many Americans simply don't

understand Islam, Muhammad said. "Muslims must educate others about what Islam really is," he said. Compassion among people — Christian, Muslim or Jew; white or black; rich or poor — emerges from an understanding of the past.

"In order to understand Islam, one must know something about its history," Muhammad said. "Not having that information would be similar to trying to understand the Christian faith without knowing something about what took place in Nazareth and Bethlehem."

Many of today's false impressions stem from the assumption that Islam is theologically entwined with the cultures of the regions where Islam prevails, he said. The assumption that Muslim women are degraded and deprived of education, for example, is untrue. Islam itself does not thwart a woman's potential. In Afghanistan, for example, it's the Taliban regime that limits freedoms. It is a system rather than a religion that denies what most nations uphold as birthrights.

Muhammad said it is his privilege and pledge as a Muslim chaplain in the Army to illuminate the little-known truths of his faith. In addition to

A close-up photograph of a man with a shaved head, wearing a black and white checkered button-down shirt. He is looking down with a focused expression, and his hands are held in front of him in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra), with palms facing each other and fingers pointing upwards. The background is dark and out of focus.

Soldier

leading Muslim services and planning events that help others strengthen their relationships with God, he extends his services to all soldiers, regardless of their religious beliefs.

The Path

Muhammad has always felt the push of invisible hands. There were times when he mingled with the wrong crowd, when he could have been killed, but wasn't. There was also the persistent intuition that religion was more than he'd been taught or under-

stood — "with all due respect to the way my parents raised me," he said.

At the State University of New York, Muhammad majored in anthropology with an emphasis in comparative religion. How fascinating, he thought then, that people everywhere worship something greater than themselves — in their own ways, but for the same purpose.

"I'd had difficulty accepting Jesus as God, but I respected my parents, and I always did what my father told

Workers at Walter Reed AMC sit in quiet meditation in the hospital's Islamic Prayer Room. There are some 7 million Muslims in the United States.

me to do," he said. When the time came for Muhammad to make his own decisions, he openly explored his spirituality.

At 20 — after a deep attraction to the charisma and faith of Malcolm X, and enlightened by English versions of the Koran, Islam's holy book — Muhammad made Islam his religion of choice.

Though Muhammad's parents raised 11 children and instilled in them the importance of providing for the family, the church-going pair kept mum about their son's resolution. It



Chaplain Muhammad's son, Haroon, watches his mother Saleema make a salad in preparation for fast breaking at the end of the day during the holy month of Ramadan.

wasn't until after he joined the Army as a chaplain's assistant, had reclassified as a supply specialist, left the Army and eight years later was commissioned as the Army's first Muslim chaplain that his parents verbally blessed their son's religious choice.

It was a day he treasures: Friday, Dec. 3, 1993. "My parents were asked all kinds of questions they weren't prepared to answer," Muhammad said of the day reporters trailed him and his family through the Pentagon after a high-profile commissioning ceremony.

"Imagine what it was like for them," he said. "They were average African-American people who had never before been the subject of media attention."

Someone from the Buffalo News asked Muhammad's father what kind of child the new chaplain had been. "This kid here, I never had any problem with him. Not one day in my life," Muhammad's father said.

"I've come to realize that this was his way of saying, 'Who am I to question the decisions my son has made?' I'd made other decisions that were good, so maybe he thought this one was just as good as any of the others, even though he didn't understand it," Muhammad said.

Religion soon became a favored subject for the chaplain's father.

"I think our talks about Islam strengthened my father's faith," Muhammad said. "Though he didn't understand God from my perspective, I think he came to see how God was moving in my life, and we'd always been taught that anything good comes from God."

Ready to Defend

Defense Department officials estimate that approximately 4,000 Muslims wear U.S. military uniforms. Muhammad thinks there are probably three times that number based on attendance at religious services, plus the fact that not all soldiers reveal their religious preferences. The Army alone has seven Muslim chaplains.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, Muhammad has not advised a single soldier who questions whether a Muslim's loyalty should be to Islam or to America.

"We live here, work here, pay taxes here and contribute here," he said. "We are Americans in every sense and

we want to defend our rights to enjoy all of these freedoms."

Muhammad doesn't believe that America is "out to get" Muslims. "There are seven million of us living right here. It would seem to me that if the United States were about the business of destroying Islam, it would start right here. Look at me. I'm a chaplain in the United States Army. Why would I exist if the U.S. wanted to destroy Islam?"

Though Muslim soldiers may be sympathetic toward fellow Muslims living in Afghanistan, Muhammad said most American Muslims were leery about halting U.S. military operations for the sake of such religious holidays as Ramadan, when Muslims fast.

Muslims have already fought and won wars during Ramadan, such as the 7th century Battle of Badr, when the Muslims were outnumbered 10 to 1 by the pagan Arabs.

"Yet they won this battle decisively," the chaplain said, adding that today's circumstances allow American Muslim soldiers to defend what America has lost and all that has been taken away from Islam.

Terrorism has fueled Americans' devotion to the nation, Muhammad



Muslims pray five times a day while facing Mecca, the holy city where Allah and his word were revealed to Muhammad.

*"I've sworn to work for the good of America,
and I'll gladly do that as both a chaplain and as a soldier."*



Chaplain Muhammad chats with Air Force Chaplain Brian McCormack outside Walter Reed hospital's Islamic Prayer Room.

said, but still the U.S. has not reached its pinnacle.

"There's never been a country like this in the history of the world, where people learn to coexist religiously, socially, culturally, racially, economically, ethically," he said. Though personal distinctions may rouse anger, Americans are still united.

"I think all that is happening now is taking us to a point at which we will eventually reach our greatest pinnacle and have a deeper understanding of one another," Muhammad said. "We have much to be proud of, and much still to accomplish."

The Sept. 11 terrorists were not true Muslims, he said, and they were not martyred. The victims who died that day were the true martyrs and died — like soldiers on a battlefield — for America's virtue.

"I'll go to my grave believing that," Muhammad said. "I've sworn to work for the good of America, and I'll gladly do that as both a chaplain and as a soldier." □

Understanding Islam

DR. Dave Damrel is desperate to make a point: Islamic terrorism is a contradiction of terms.

"When people think of Islam, they have all these automatic stereotypes of Muslims dressed a certain way, of the desert and of camels," said Damrel, who teaches world religion at Arizona State University and specializes in Islam.

Second only to Christianity, Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world. Its 1.2 billion followers make up a quarter of the world's population, and the vast majority live in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

According to Amir Hussain, a Muslim and California State University professor of religious studies, about one-third of the Muslims in the United States are Middle Eastern, one-third are African-American and one-third are South Asian.

"Islam" means "submission" in Arabic, and shares the God of the Christian and Hebrew bibles. Closely related to Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a monotheistic faith that supports generosity, compassion and kindness.

"It's seen as having a kind of family relationship with both religions, meaning that all three share critical religious figures, as well as ideas and world views," Damrel said.

Although Islam affirms such prophetic figures as Abraham and Jesus, Muslims believe that Muhammad — a 7th century merchant — is the final prophet. God, or Allah in Arabic, revealed himself to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Muhammad then recorded God's word into the Koran, the Muslim holy book.

Muslims are action-oriented believers. They devote themselves to the Pillars of Islam to strengthen their faith and submit to God. The first pillar is a believer's declaration that there is no other God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet. Prayer is the second pillar, and Muslims pray five times a day while facing Mecca, the holy city where Allah and his word were revealed to Muhammad.

The third pillar of faith is charity. Rather than frowning upon materialism, Islam encourages followers to share their belongings with the less fortunate. Many of those who are able are asked to give two and a half percent of their capital to charity.

Islam's fourth pillar is the observance of Ramadan, when Muslims fast during the ninth month of the lunar calendar to commemorate the time when Muhammad received his first revelation. Though money and health may limit a Muslim's opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, this fifth pillar of the faith is considered a sacred duty.

"Islam is a religion that has many of the same values as conservative Christianity," said Arizona State University professor Dr. Mark Woodward, who has lived and traveled throughout the Muslim world.

"It places a great deal of emphasis on personal piety, and on personal and public morality," he said. "Basic Muslim values would go over real well with Southern Baptists." — *Adriane Foss*

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